

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

Baptism of Our Lord  
Luke 3:16

17 January 2021  
Salem, Bridgeport

“Baptized - with the Holy Spirit and with Fire!”

I just love how God works!

Last Sunday Tabor's supply pastor canceled at the last minute  
and their president called to see if I could share my sermon with them.

I couldn't share my sermon for that week with them

because we were celebrating Epiphany at Salem, not the Baptism of Our Lord.

But I read through my old sermons on the Baptism of Jesus to see what I could find.

Usually I don't even look at old sermons, and when I do, it's not often I find one I would ever preach again,  
but this time I found one that said exactly what I would still want to say.

In fact, it was so perfect I thought it might be worth sharing at Salem this week.

But at their meeting on Monday night Tabor's Council decided

that they were going to invite the congregation to worship with Bethesda or with Salem this week.

Well, if Tabor folk were coming to worship with us,

I couldn't very well use the same sermon they heard last week!

Obviously God had something else in mind for my preaching this week!

And I can't wait to share with you what God has shared with me.

In our gospel reading today from Luke we heard,

*“John answered... ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming....  
He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’”*

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire! That's what God promised and that's what God did.

On Pentecost the disciples were baptized, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

So what does it mean to be baptized with the Spirit and fire?

In the book of Acts we read that the house where the disciples had gathered to pray & read scripture & worship  
was suddenly filled with the sound of a violent wind,

that tongues of fire rested on them,

that they began to speak in tongues about God's deeds of power, and that people thought they were drunk!

That mighty wind was the Holy Spirit who brought 3 gifts for the disciples.

The first thing the Spirit brought was fire – a fire that rested on them, that touched them –  
and then, curiously, we don't hear any more about the fire.

Certainly the people in the streets were reacting to them, talking about their speech and their behavior,  
but no one mentioned any fire over their heads.

So what happened to the fire?

The bible doesn't tell us, but to me it seems perfectly obvious:

the fire that came and alighted on their heads, burned its way into them,

and as it burned its way into them, it burned away everything that had kept them locked away in a building,  
comforting each other, praying, reading scripture, and worshipping God in their own little group.

They had had this amazing relationship with Jesus, and he had taught them so much,

and it was great coming together to remember what all they had been through together  
and to take comfort in the fact that they were still together.

They had seen Christ raised from the dead!

They knew the love of Jesus & the power of God, & it was a wonderful thing.

But God had something MORE in mind.

Jesus had promised them something MORE.

And on that day of Pentecost, the Spirit rushed in and gave them something MORE!

The Spirit set their hearts on fire, and they could no longer keep the good news to themselves.  
They HAD to share it.

God was so amazing, so awesome, so astounding, that once that fire was blazing in their hearts,  
they could not possibly keep it to themselves.

They couldn't stay in the building.

They ran out into the streets to tell everyone they met  
about the boundless power and endless love of God in Christ.

And then the Spirit gave them another gift – the gift of tongues.

For Pentecostals that experience of speaking in tongues is a powerful one,  
one that remains as a touch point throughout their lives.

Should they ever entertain any doubts about God's power in their lives,  
they can look back on their baptism and remember how the Spirit flowed through them  
and they found themselves speaking in a language they didn't know –  
just like the disciples at Pentecost.

But for those who have not had that experience,  
what do we make of the disciples' gift of tongues?

To me its importance lies in the fact that motivated by that fire, that desire,  
that ardent passion to tell everyone about the power of God,  
the disciples opened themselves up to speak,  
not in a way that was native or familiar or comfortable to them,  
but in a way that others could hear.

I've been attending an online worship symposium this past week and a half  
that has featured congregations that take seriously God's call to be inclusive communities.

As these congregations worship you see people  
of different colors, from different cultures, speaking in different languages,  
and the powerful message it sends to me is that these are communities of people  
who are not tied together by race, or ethnic heritage, or socio-economic class,  
or historical worship patterns, or anything else that can be discerned by eye or ear.

The only thing that the members have in common  
is their love of God, their faith in Jesus Christ and their unity in the bonds of the Spirit.

So in their baptism by the Spirit the disciples' were given two gifts:  
their hearts were set on fire, and they were given the gift of tongues –  
their tongues were loosed to allow God to speak through them in new and unfamiliar ways.

And besides having their hearts set on fire and their tongues loosened,  
they were given a third gift.

The scripture doesn't name it, but it does infer it.

People thought the disciples were drunk, and I think that's because they were drunk with joy.

I think they were so overcome by their experience  
of having their hearts set on fire, and their tongues unleashed in praise,  
that they were filled to overflowing with the joy of it all.

I have to tell you that when I read that sermon I wrote YEARS ago  
about the power of the Spirit, I was amazed.  
Because everything I had said in it was absolutely true,  
and I preached that sermon because I believed it.  
But since that time, God has set my heart on fire,  
and given me the ability to speak in new ways,  
and has filled me with a joy I did not know before.

It's as if I had written a beautiful poem about how delicious chocolate is  
without having tasted it.  
From research, from interviews, from conversations about chocolate,  
I had gotten the words all right.  
But then I tasted chocolate.  
And all of the sudden, that beautiful poem has taken on a whole new level of meaning.

I would guess that all of us here on zoom have been baptized with water  
and the Spirit has certainly been active in our lives,  
but what I want to share with you is this –  
that no matter how intimate our relationship with God is, there is always MORE.

My prayer for each of us is that as we gather together today as the disciples of old,  
that the Holy Spirit would come as a rushing wind, and set our hearts on fire  
so that we simply cannot keep the news of God's power and love to ourselves.  
My prayer is that we would understand that through the pandemic  
the Spirit has already driven us out of our church walls and into the world.  
My prayer is that we would be so overcome by God's awesome power  
that we simply will not be able to stop talking about it.  
My prayer is that we would be so drunk with the joy of the Lord  
that everyone who sees us would want what we have found.

Our world right now is grieving –  
over the loss of life and health and economic stability due to the pandemic,  
over racial injustice & over the threats to our democracy –  
and we are grieving all sorts of losses in our personal lives.  
But in the midst of all the fear and uncertainty, all the loss and grief, all the doubt and despair,  
God has promised a baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Rooted in that promise blooms this blessing:  
May your heart be set on fire.  
May your tongue be loosed to praise.  
May God fulfill your heart's desire.  
And may joy crown all your days. **Amen**